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# THE BRITISH UNION OF FASCISTS AND ANTI-SEMITISM IN BIRMINGHAM\*

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The British Union of Fascists (BUF) was strongly anti-Semitic. The annual reports of the Board of Deputies of British Jews document the BUF's anti-Semitic activity. Surveying the events of 1933 it pointed out that the German example was not without its effects on elements within Britain, 'although anti-Jewish propaganda here, which is instigated by an insignificant minority, received no encouragement from responsible organs of the press or leaders of public opinion'.<sup>1</sup> The position was such that still the Board, 'must contemplate a greater interest in the affairs of Jews in other countries'. The next yearly report could not avoid the increasing emphasis on anti-Semitism at home. This made 'constant vigilance more than ever essential and influenced the work of practically every committee'.<sup>2</sup> Such vigilance was even more essential by 1936 when the Board reported 'anti-Semitism is now a permanent feature'.<sup>3</sup> By this time, the BUF received support from the more anti-Semitic Nazi movement. In the beginning Sir Oswald Mosley was called a 'Kosher fascist' by rivals who were far more extreme. *Der Stürmer* abused the BUF as 'a Jewish catch-up movement'. By 1934 the support of its editor, Holz, was gained and *Der Stürmer* explicitly retracted. 'The Mosley movement has given our representatives an opportunity of convincing themselves that it is anti-Semitic'.<sup>4</sup> Julius Streicher added, 'Mosley has now realized the tactical reserve hitherto shown by him on this question is no longer expedient'.<sup>5</sup> This has become the accepted image of the movement.

Analysis of the BUF's anti-Semitism is growing<sup>6</sup> and particularly of the East London atrocities.<sup>7</sup> Yet Robert Skidelsky was correct to complain that too little is known of what was happening at the grassroots between Mosleyites and Jews.<sup>8</sup> This is true of the BUF as a whole. Away from the political centre of the movement focused around its leader, Sir Oswald Mosley, and outside the confines of East London, virtually nothing is known at the local level about the movement

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generally or its anti-Semitism. This neglect can have significant consequences, for it is obvious that an ideology is not propagated with equal effort and commitment in all the areas in which its followers are represented. With regard to the BUF, previous research has shown that many local branches, intentionally or unintentionally, sometimes interpreted the wider ideology in terms of the circumstances of their area.<sup>9</sup>

By focusing attention on the local branches rather than the movement's leadership, this paper argues that while the BUF was anti-Semitic, it was so with different levels of commitment and degrees of activity. Specifically it will be shown that, for a number of reasons, anti-Semitism could not succeed in the Midlands with the characteristics of Midland Jewry making it an unfruitful area for anti-Semitic exploitation. Accordingly, the local branches did not concentrate on this aspect of the movement's ideology. These arguments have a wider and more general relevance, for they throw light on the nature of the BUF as a social movement, on the status of anti-Semitism in its ideology and on the localized appeal of anti-Semitism as a political issue in Britain.

Fascism was never particularly strong in Birmingham or the West Midlands generally.<sup>10</sup> The Birmingham branch was the premier branch in the West Midlands, although there were smaller branches in most of the West Midland towns. Birmingham's pre-eminence not only reflected the city's position in the area but also the fact that Mosley had strong links with Birmingham while in the Labour Party. The membership of the Birmingham branch shot up from 200 at the end of 1933 to 2,000 by the spring of the following year. This mirrored the progress of the national movement as it gained the active support of influential newspapers like the *Daily Mail* and *Evening News*. This was by far the largest membership the branch ever achieved, but as it was, it represented only 0.197% of Birmingham's total population. From the summer of 1934 the branch went into rapid decline. National factors influenced this. The movement lost the support of Lord Rothermere's newspaper chain and drew considerable unfavourable publicity as fascists exuberantly attacked opponents at public meetings. Many disorderly meetings took place in the Midlands. The decline coincided with a growing public awareness of the atrocities of Nazism. From 1935 to 1939 the membership of the Birmingham branch stabilized at between 100 and 125 members. This represented the hard-core support for the BUF in Birmingham. Political activity fell to a low ebb as the branch became moribund. A series of personal and ideological disputes within the branch further advanced this decline as it went from one authority crisis to another. The incidental rewards of membership, such as 'fascist grand teas', marches and so on, became one of the branch's main functions, with the leadership failing to encourage effective propaganda. No local elections were fought. Generally there was little co-operation between the West Midland branches in pooling their resources to ensure the maximum benefit from them in any campaign. The only exception to this protracted

decline occurred in the months just prior to the Second World War. The BUF's energetic peace campaign increased activity and support in Birmingham. The increase in membership was largely among pacifists and then at the expense of other pacifist organizations. More important, the branch lost its stable patriotic appeal and was disbanded in 1940 under Defence Regulation 18b when it was feared that BUF members might act as fifth-columnists for the Germans.

One of the most important features of this decline was the inability of the Birmingham branch to use political anti-Semitism to revitalize itself in the same way as this occurred in the wider movement in 1935–6. The BUF's campaign against the Jewish community never focused with force in the West Midlands. In terms of some local branches functioning in the fascist outposts in the countryside, there was a less exclusive interest in and obsession with anti-Semitism. In fact only the East End of London witnessed the sustained violent anti-Semitic campaign that has become associated with the BUF as a whole. Some sporadic violence did erupt elsewhere particularly in Manchester and Leeds, but this was not sustained over a long period like the East London violence. One is nonetheless justified in focusing on the East London campaign because it was deliberately made a symbol by Mosley. He realized the East End was unique. Here as nowhere else existed a large closely packed and distinctive Jewish minority. Success in other areas could only come by extrapolating the features of the East End on to the nation as a whole. Mosley had to convince the country that the East End's characteristics were not special but were merely a microcosm of the nation's.

The East End of London was in many respects like numerous industrial areas in the North and Midlands, showing the effects of the rapid industrialization and over-population of Victorian Britain. Economically the industries which served the area were in decline, leaving a social legacy of derelict buildings, impoverishment and decay. The East End boroughs of Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, and Stepney were ranked second, third and fourth respectively among London boroughs in terms of people per acre, and when ranked in terms of more than two people per room, Shoreditch was second with both other boroughs ranked third.<sup>11</sup> Some areas of Birmingham were similarly derelict but in East London these economic and social problems were intensified by a high level of Jewish immigration.<sup>12</sup> Three factors differentiate East London. After the mass influx of Jews at the turn of the century, the East End functioned as a staging area in the vast dispersal of East European Jewry throughout the English speaking world, to other parts of London and the provinces.<sup>13</sup> In the thirties those older immigrants who had stayed in the East End, whose assimilation was partially complete, were joined by new immigrants who used the East End as their staging area, only moving elsewhere after their first experiences of integration there. In East London therefore was contained a large identifiable Jewish minority with their imported East European culture, Yiddish language, respect for Jewish law and deeply held traditionalist religious practices. In view

of this, the density of the Jewish population in the East End was high. At one time 90 per cent of London's Jewish population lived there, and the percentage declined by 1929 to 60.<sup>14</sup> With the influx of immigrants during the 1930s, the area's share of Greater London Jewry increased by 10 per cent, emphasizing the use of East London as a staging area. So contained within the few boroughs of London's East End was the major proportion of its Jewish community. In consequence of this density, the physical presence of the Jewish community was far greater in this area. This opened up the possibility of anti-Semitic exploitation.

The prestigious UNESCO volume on Hitler's anti-Semitism by Leon Poliakov, the major historian on anti-Semitism, analyzed Hitler's campaign in terms of five categories.<sup>15</sup> First and most important, Jews were perceived as a cohesive group; secondly they were represented as malevolent; thirdly, there was an attempt to prove they were inferior; fourthly, Poliakov noted the systematic reference to their sexual passions; finally, there was the direction of violence against Jews. As Mandle notes in his study of the BUF's anti-Semitism, only the fourth characteristic is one the BUF did not share.<sup>16</sup> If one recognizes these as the fundamental components of anti-Semitism,<sup>17</sup> the starting point is the transformation of Jews into a cohesive whole, all indistinguishable, with no individual exceptions or extenuations. Upon this the rest follows, for without it there is merely an objection to *individual* exceptions to an *acceptable* norm. The core of the anti-Semitic emotion is not thinking of Jews as Jews but the conviction that this particular cohesive whole exerts a malevolent influence on the host society. Once Jews are seen as forming one unit, it is much easier to perceive them as an evil unit. This transformation is more likely in a context in which Jews seem a united close-knit group and where the physical proximity of Jews is greater. This is in some way an obvious point and likewise today it has been found the most important factor in making coloured immigration an issue is physical proximity to immigrants.<sup>18</sup>

The BUF realized the East End's special features. At the beginning it paid little heed to the area. The first Bethnal Green branch was not formed until 1934 and the first Shoreditch branch in the winter of 1934. Only by 1935 was the location decided upon. Thereafter 80 meetings were held within the next six months in Bethnal Green alone. Reports in the fascist press of East End activities began to increase in number, even an edition of *Blackshirt* was specially published for the East End. Time, effort and financial resources were expended in the campaign. By the fact of concentrating resources there the area was made even more favourable to anti-Semitic rhetoric. This acted as a vicious circle, for only there did the movement's anti-Semitic propaganda achieve the intensity and immediacy needed for results. This effort evoked a response. In the 1937 London County Council elections the BUF polled an average 19 per cent of votes cast in the three seats it contested, while in Bethnal Green it received 23 per cent of the poll. This was on a register of municipal electors which excluded those under twenty-one

years of age, a section of the community in which the BUF received its greatest support.

It is now possible to understand the reasons why anti-Semitism did not feature significantly in the West Midlands and why the local branches there did not concentrate on this aspect of the wider ideology. In most areas both total numbers of the Jewish population and their density were low. Outside London the only large centres of Jewish population in 1938 were Leeds with 30,000, Manchester with 37,000 and Glasgow with 15,000. This is small in comparison with London's quarter of a

Table 1. *Leading Centres of Jewish Population in the Midlands in 1938*

Place	Jewish population in total numbers	As a % of total city population
Birmingham	6,000	0.591
Nottingham	550	0.238
Leicester	330	0.128
Oxford	169	0.123
Derby	138	0.098
Wolverhampton	135	0.095
Coventry	150	0.078
Northampton	74	0.074
Stoke-on-Trent	190	0.069
Wellington	4	0.050
Dudley	6	0.009

million. Table 1 provides figures relating to the Midlands.<sup>19</sup> This clearly indicates that in Birmingham, for instance, only 6,000 of its total population were Jewish, a mere 0.591 per cent, or approximately one in every 200. Similarly in Nottingham, for example, the total Jewish population amounted to only 550, 0.238 per cent of Nottingham's total population, or one in every 500.

In such circumstances the physical presence and proximity of the Jewish communities in the Midlands was indistinct. This is especially so because the Jewish communities comprised mainly assimilated Jews and not refugees, most of whom had gone to the staging area of the East End. An important consequence followed from this. The Jewish communities were not geographically located in any one residential area but were dispersed in line with the patterns of geographical and social mobility. With regard to the activities of local fascists, this made for a less explosive situation with their hatred incapable of being focused in any one area. The Jewish communities were not readily identifiable and no one residential area of the cities could be described as Jewish.

The vicious circle was not set in motion as it was in East London. Because Birmingham, and the Midlands generally, were unfavourable to fascist exploitation there was no strenuous anti-Semitic campaign. This itself reduced the opportunity for successful anti-Semitic exploitation in the area as efforts were concentrated on other facets of the ideology. In

an interview, the District Leader for Birmingham from 1934 to 1940 recognized this. 'The general economic policy was propagated, as was the agricultural policy due to support in the farming areas surrounding Birmingham'.<sup>20</sup> While the District Leader might be expected to claim this, there was in Birmingham virtually a complete neglect of anti-Semitism.

Three indices verify this. One index is provided by the reports of the vigilance committees of the Board of Deputies of British Jews. These were established in 1936, their purpose being to make note of anti-Semitic campaigns in their area, watch the columns of the local press and check 'anti-social behaviour' among the Jewish community. The Board conceived of them as 'the watch brief of the community'.<sup>21</sup> The story they reveal is one of an exclusive concentration on East London with other areas virtually ignored. In 1937 Birmingham's vigilance committee reported no fascist activity but in Ladywood there was an attempt 'mainly through the public houses' to stir up feeling. 'They have unfortunately picked on a weak spot as in this district there has been some unfortunate behaviour on the part of certain Jewish landlords. This particular agitation is being taken care of'.<sup>22</sup> It has been shown that the practices of Jewish employers in the East End were influential in fanning the claims of local fascists.<sup>23</sup> Birmingham lacked this ethnically structured industry anyway, but where the practices of Jewish employers or landlords might engender criticism, a great deal of community pressure was applied on the culprit.

Birmingham was not unique among Midland cities in this neglect. Coventry's vigilance committee reported no activity 'at the moment'. In fact there were no pessimistic reports by any of the Midland committees. In 1938 the situation had further improved. Birmingham's committee reported no activity, 'the police are strict and prevent inflammatory speeches. "Heil Mosley" is occasionally to be seen scrawled on walls but the movement in Birmingham is insignificant'.<sup>24</sup> In Leicester 'no activity of a serious nature' was reported, the fascist meetings there were 'more or less a fiasco'. In Nottingham, 'occasionally offensive slogans are scrawled' while in Wolverhampton they could report optimistically of the branch's anti-Semitism being 'an unknown quantity'. Thus the Board felt it could state, 'blatant anti-Semitism is not conspicuous'.<sup>25</sup> By 1939 Birmingham's vigilance committee summed up the general position in the Midlands, 'there is no anti-Semitism of any consequence', fascist activities are 'on a lesser scale than hitherto'.<sup>26</sup>

This index should be treated with caution. The vigilance committees were established at the height of Mosley's anti-Semitic campaign in 1936. The anti-Semitic campaign declined in intensity after 1936, even in the East End.<sup>27</sup> The reports are inevitably biased towards revealing a declining anti-Semitism. Two other indices of the strength of the campaign in the West Midlands at the height of the wider movement's campaign in 1936 are available. By far the most accurate is that provided by interviews with ordinary members of the Jewish community in

Birmingham. A number of respondents each testified to Birmingham lacking serious political anti-Semitism. A certain 'social anti-Semitism' existed, described as the 'middle class golf club variety', 'but in comparison with the East End this was not really anti-Semitism'.<sup>28</sup> The respondent summed up, 'the general feeling was with the Jews. Nobody cared for Mosley's hatred and tub thumping. Birmingham was not unique in this'. The effect of this was that Birmingham's Jewish community was more concerned with events outside Birmingham, and in most cases outside Britain. The local Jewish community was quick to take up the pen and the correspondence columns of the local press show that passions were aroused but the majority of letters dealt with German Jewry.

A third index is provided by study of the activities of local BUF branches. The District Leader indicated that anti-Semitism was not laboured and this is reflected in the Birmingham branch's activities. A serious, determined and concentrated campaign was not undertaken.<sup>29</sup> The District Leader did think there were Jewish elements in the city working against the branch, centred on the Communist Party, and claimed they attempted to infiltrate the branch. 'On one occasion one of our private meetings in the Temple Bar was reported verbatim in the *Jewish Chronicle*'. This account is indicative of some conflict between them. A Jewish respondent, a schoolboy at the time, did recall some incidents. He stated that he was aware of a fascist campaign 'but felt no personal threat and it made no difference to my personal life'.<sup>30</sup> His father owned a tailor's shop in Bearwood Road. Just before the war they experienced their only incident, with local fascists breaking windows, writing slogans and harassing customers.

This neglect was also commented upon by the BUF's Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Evesham, one of only two prospective candidates in the whole area. In an interview the candidate confirmed, 'my political actions as PPC were mainly dedicated to the problems of the land'.<sup>31</sup> 'All my efforts were dedicated to building up British agriculture, feeding the country on our own produce to the maximum possible'.<sup>32</sup> With regard to anti-Semitism he said, 'it was never a question that came up in the constituency. I cannot recollect any occasion when it was raised at one of our meetings. It was never a major question. Really the only question raised was one of the land. I had nothing to say on Jews. There was so much to say on the question of the land, farming, farm production, home production versus imports, that I found it was taking up all the time allotted to meetings'.<sup>33</sup>

What partly enabled these former fascists to claim this, was the absence in their areas of a militant and active Communist Party, which in the East End had been influential in stimulating violent opposition to the BUF, especially from young militant Jews.<sup>34</sup> This is not to claim that the local Jewish communities in the West Midlands were unprepared to meet any fascist campaign. In Birmingham this preparation took other forms than violent revenge attacks. The Birmingham Jewish community



was prepared to confront the BUF's campaign in a number of ways which further reduced the opportunity for successful fascist exploitation in the area. The Board of Deputies recognized many areas existed where anti-Semitism did not feature significantly but pressurized the Jewish communities there not to relax their vigilance.<sup>35</sup> To counter the claim of being 'alien' a campaign was begun in the Midlands to show the antiquity of Midland Jewry, revealing many Jews accompanied the Norman Conquest and several prospered in the vicinity of Birmingham. It was claimed that by 1206 there was a Jewish community in Edgbaston large enough to have acquired its own burial ground.<sup>36</sup> This early settlement would have vanished during the later middle ages, but there is evidence of a thriving community by the 19th century. In 1842 there were 110 families in Birmingham, a synagogue having been in Severn Street since 1809.<sup>37</sup> In other Midland cities the Jewish communities were well established by the 1930s. The *Jewish Year Book* in 1939 reported that the community in Coventry was established by 1870, Derby's community was founded in 1899, and Leicester's in 1895. The Northampton community was established in 1889, while Nottingham's was founded in 1823, its first synagogue being built in 1890. The first synagogue in Wolverhampton was built in 1858, while at Stoke-on-Trent one was founded in 1873.

The fascist claim of being 'alien' meant two distinct things. First it implied rejection of Jewish refugees from Germany and Eastern Europe with their imported 'foreign' culture, of which there were few in Birmingham or the Midlands generally. But it meant more, a rejection of even long established Jewish communities merely for being 'different' in other ways – hence the fascist obsession with the physical features, religious practices, occupational and financial characteristics, and to a lesser extent even the sexual passions of Jews. To the fascists, these 'differences' characterized Jews irrespective of their antiquity in Britain. No doubt aware of this, the Birmingham Jewish community was extremely sensitive. The claims of local fascists did make the Birmingham community aware of its own behaviour. This was also influenced by the fate of Jews in Germany. But largely the sensitivity was pre-emptive: it was not a response to the activities of local fascists but their attempt to avoid giving local fascists any ready cause for exploitation. There was a call for a special Birmingham Propaganda Committee independent of the vigilance committee and Representative Council. The feeling behind this new committee was expressed by a respondent who felt the writing of letters to the press by Jews, especially 'unqualified Jewish correspondents', should be stopped, 'especially on political matters'. It was such self-awareness which in large part prevented any ill-feeling developing, for because of it the Jewish community controlled what the Board of Deputies termed 'the internal causes of anti-Semitism'. In this way little anti-Jewish feeling was provoked by the actions of Jews themselves. It was the function of the Representative Council to check the anti-social behaviour of the Jewish community by making it conscious of the effects

of its individual malpractices, to obtain the co-operation of all elements in their elimination and to investigate individual cases of such malpractice.

The Jewish community in the city was perhaps fortunate in having its own journal, the *Birmingham Jewish Recorder*, which continually extolled its readers to be cautious. It published a 'Manifesto of Birmingham Jewry',<sup>38</sup> arguing that responsibility to the general community was called for to avoid 'fault finding on the part of our neighbours'. The signatories to the Manifesto were convinced that much unfavourable comment was aroused 'by the sight of Jews and Jewesses congregating in large numbers in public places on the Sabbath'. They were urged to hurry home. Other incidents are pertinent in this context. An appeal was made to any Jewish person winning raffle prizes and so on to pass them over, for it was overheard on one occasion that 'the Jews are walking away with all the prizes'.<sup>39</sup> The community organized many similar fund-raising activities – card playing, whist drives and coffee mornings – which were held in public places. It was thought to be undesirable 'at the present time and giving rise to unfavourable comment' because 'these gatherings are sometimes rather noisy and critics may not be aware the card playing was for charity'.<sup>40</sup> Thereafter such gatherings were held in the Jewish Community Hall. The typically English and 'middle class' nature of these activities illustrates how assimilated the Birmingham community was by this time.

So as not to appear unpatriotic, Jews were encouraged to enlist in the Auxiliary Fire Service, the ARP and the Territorial Army. It was felt an increase in Jewish volunteers beyond their proportion 'is a duty to show to England by our actions that we accept the benefits of citizenship as well as not hesitating to shoulder all responsibilities'.<sup>41</sup> Parents were urged to encourage their sons to enlist. Above all the honour of the Jewish name was at risk. 'We must not let it be said that the Jew is prepared to take the rights and privileges of citizenship in a free country but unprepared to accept its responsibilities'.<sup>42</sup> Consequently it was reported with a certain pride that 95 per cent of all Jewish women in Balsall Heath, Cannon Hill and Moseley belonged to some unit of national service.<sup>43</sup>

As a further part of this process the Head Rabbi frequently met with largely non-Jewish audiences to counter fascist propaganda. Dr Cohen, the Head Rabbi, gave many lectures rebutting fascist allegations. His links with the general community were good. He had contact with the Rotary Club, local church groups, women's organizations, WEA students and the local university. He had the support of the local Church of England in combating fascist claims. The vigilance committee reported close co-operation with church leaders in Birmingham's Anglican diocese, who were 'interested in the campaign against anti-Semitism'.<sup>44</sup> This was reflected in inter-denominational meetings of both a religious and social character. Birmingham was typical in this. The Board of Deputies recognized the general support of the Church. Neville

Laški in a speech before the Church Assembly in 1937, expressed deep appreciation for the support given by the Church of England, and the Archbishop of Canterbury in particular, who spoke out on several occasions against anti-Semitism.<sup>45</sup>

All this tells us something of Jews as a community in the West Midlands. Neither as followers of a religion nor as members of an ethnic group did Jews have any specific relationship to the socio-political system which could cause resentment or be exploited. They were neither a political bloc nor an ethnic minority bloc. In reality Midland Jewry was undifferentiated from the general community and it was difficult to identify as a structural entity. Jewish cultural habits there were in plenty but they were not widespread enough to constitute a specific way of life peculiar to Jews which local fascists could focus upon.<sup>46</sup>

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On this evidence the BUF was obviously not a mass movement, either in the sense of having a mass following or, more particularly, in having the strict disciplinarian, authoritarian, centralized character of mass movements. Local BUF branches had great independence from the movement's political centre, even to the extent of not following it down the path of a violent, abusive and aggressive anti-Semitism. The corollary of this is that the political centre failed to impose itself upon the branches. This independence was evident in the Birmingham district branch.<sup>47</sup> It showed itself in the branch receiving only rare visits from National Headquarters and in the District Leader's discretion in determining the branch's ideological, organizational and political activities. The Birmingham district branch failed to engage in the kind of anti-Semitic campaign associated with the movement as a whole. Such discretion was commented upon in interviews with various former fascists, including the Birmingham District Leader, Birmingham Women's District Leader, the Propaganda Officer in Islington, London, the District Leader in Bromley and the BUF Prospective Parliamentary Candidates in Evesham and Eye.<sup>48</sup> The movement's acute financial crisis after 1934-5 did not lend itself to a close relationship between centre and periphery and Mosley's political background and experience lay in the British party system, not in organizing extra-parliamentary movements. This gave the BUF a fluid character from which developed the great disunity and lack of co-ordination which dogged the local branches.<sup>49</sup> With regard to anti-Semitism, the local branches in Birmingham and the West Midlands possessed, by design or fault, the discretion to decide the extent to which they made this the central feature of their political and ideological campaigns; and they under-played it.

This in some ways forces a review of Mosley's leadership and his personal position on anti-Semitism. Mosley's personal attitudes towards Jews have been the source of considerable debate.<sup>50</sup> This is largely irrelevant, for whatever his attitudes, he failed to prevent the progressive

incorporation of political anti-Semitism into the movement's ideology and practices to such an extent that the leadership of the movement made anti-Semitism into its main ideological orientation between 1934 and 1937.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Mosley's image as a restraining figure on the extreme anti-Semitism of his lieutenants,<sup>52</sup> runs counter to the evidence in the West Midlands. The speeches he made when visiting the area, particularly the Leicester speech in 1935, show a greater concern with anti-Semitism than most of the local branches in the area, and a greater tendency to express this concern in an abusive manner.<sup>53</sup>

This raises the issue of the status of anti-Semitism in BUF ideology. The political centre made anti-Semitism its chief ideological theme after 1934, but even before this date, an analysis of the fascist press and the speeches of the leadership show anti-Semitism to have existed from the beginnings of the movement in 1932.<sup>54</sup> In response to the work of Brewer, Benewick and Mandle, Colin Holmes has argued that in this regard, the progression toward a violent and aggressive anti-Semitism was not cynical political opportunism: anti-Semitism was an integral part of the movement.<sup>55</sup> It was not opportunistic in this sense. The movement's anti-Semitism, however, was opportunistic in another sense. Ideologies are not just a fixed set of beliefs which bear no relationship to the biographical situations of their followers or the social contexts in which they operate. Ideologies are manipulated to suit these two considerations. The BUF fitted its ideology and political campaigns to the exigencies of local areas. In Evesham and East Anglia, for example, they focused exclusively on agriculture and the land.<sup>56</sup> The movement's anti-Semitism was cynically opportunistic to the extent that the campaign against Jews was absent in those areas where local circumstances made it unsuitable. In other words, the manipulation of ethnic hostility and ethnic hatred was reserved for those areas where it was assumed to have the greatest effect on the host and the immigrant communities.

All of this suggests one final point. The contrast between Birmingham and East London demonstrates that the BUF's only chance to grow in the England of the 1930s was if it took up anti-Semitism. No other issue got it anywhere after the first few euphoric months.<sup>57</sup> Only where the social, economic and ethnic prerequisites for anti-Semitism existed, did it acquire anything approaching a mass following. This says something about Mosley's mis-perception of his political possibilities when he started the BUF. Skidelsky has recently returned to the question of why the growth potential of fascism in Britain was so limited.<sup>58</sup> Rather than explaining this as due to the nature of fascism, which Benewick has argued made the BUF opposed to the main trends of British political culture,<sup>59</sup> Skidelsky's explanation lies with the fact that the existing two-party system adequately catered for the wants and emotions of most people.<sup>60</sup> Both of these reasons seem to be an essential part of any explanation which should not be monocausal. This paper suggests a further factor. This is that the appeal of political anti-Semitism in Britain was quite localized and anti-Semitism could not be generated into a

national issue. The reasons for this are legion and some of the factors operating in the case of Birmingham have been discussed in this article.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Board of Deputies, Annual Report 1932, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> *Der Stürmer*, 11 (1934), reported by R. Benewick, 'Mosley's Anti-Semitism', *Weiner Library Bulletin*, 3-4 (1959), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in the *Manchester Guardian*, 4 June 1934.

<sup>6</sup> G. Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-39* (London, 1978); W. F. Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the BUF* (London, 1968); C. Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939* (London, 1979); C. Holmes, *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society* (London, 1978); C. Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', in K. Lunn and R. Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism* (London, 1980); R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain* (London, 1972); R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London, 1975); K. Lunn and R. Thurlow, *British Fascism* . . .

<sup>7</sup> See especially N. Deakin, 'The Vitality of a Tradition', in Holmes, *Immigrants* . . . ; C. Knowles, 'Labour and Anti-Semitism', in R. Miles and A. Phizacklea, *Racism and Political Action in Britain* (London, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> R. Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism', in Lunn and Thurlow, *British Fascism* . . . , 88.

<sup>9</sup> See, J. Brewer, 'The BUF in Birmingham', *West Midlands Studies*, 14 (1981); S. Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the BUF' in Lunn and Thurlow, *British Fascism* . . . ; J. Brewer, *Mosley's Men: The BUF in the West Midlands* (1984).

<sup>10</sup> See for elaboration of this section, Brewer, 'The BUF in Birmingham' . . .

<sup>11</sup> Census of England and Wales - County of London, 1932, Tables 3, 11, 12, 13, XIX.

<sup>12</sup> Noted by Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF' . . . , 120.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Brotz, 'Outlines of Jewish Society in London', in M. Freedman, *A Minority in Britain* (London, 1958), 18. Also see Deakin, 'The Vitality of a Tradition' . . . , 159. The 'alienness' of the Jewish community there acted as the grounding to the BUF's anti-Semitism. See Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society* . . . , 188-9.

<sup>14</sup> H. Adler, 'Jewish Life and Labour in East London', in Sir H. Llewlyn, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* (London, 1934), 271.

<sup>15</sup> L. Poliakov, 'The Weapon of Anti-Semitism', *The Third Reich* (London, 1955), 832-51.

<sup>16</sup> Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and* . . . , 24 ff.

<sup>17</sup> This is by no means recognized for the literature on anti-Semitism is as diverse as that on fascism. See particularly: T. W. Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950); G. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York, 1958); Bettelheim and Janowitz, *Social Change and Prejudice* (Glencoe, 1964); A. Leschnitzer, *The Magic Background to Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1956); J. Pike, *Anti-Semitism* (London, 1963); K. S. Pinson, *Essays on Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1946); P. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (New York, 1964); J. Robb, *Working Class Anti-Semites* (London, 1954); B. Bettelheim, 'The Dynamics of Anti-Semitism in Gentile and Jew', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 42 (1947), 153-68; Frenkel-Brunwick and Scarfield, 'Some Personality Factors in Anti-Semitism', *Journal of Psychology*, 20 (1945), 271-91; Mase and Allport, 'The Causation of Anti-Semitism: An Interpretation of Several Hypotheses', *Jnl. of Psychology*, 34 (1952), 197-233.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Butler and Stokes, *Political Change in Britain* (London, 1969), 351.

<sup>19</sup> All these figures, including those contained in Table 1, have been taken as they appear in the *Jewish Yearbook* for 1939, 343-50. The inconsistency with which they are presented here, with some being given to within 1, others to the nearest 10 and some rounded to the nearest 1,000, reflects the inconsistency with which they are found in the original.

<sup>20</sup> In an interview with the author 26 January 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Board of Deputies, Co-ordinating Committee Report 1936, The Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>22</sup> Board of Deputies, Secretary's Report 1936, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>23</sup> Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF . . .', 120.

<sup>24</sup> Board of Deputies, Vigilance Committee Reports 1938, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>25</sup> Board of Deputies, Secretary's Report 1939, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>26</sup> Board of Deputies, Vigilance Committee Reports 1939, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>27</sup> For an analysis of this change in policy see Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and . . .*, 56–62 and the author's thesis at the University of Birmingham, 'The British Union of Fascists, Sir Oswald Mosley and Birmingham: An Analysis of the Content and Context of an Ideology', 1975, 158–65. The reasons for this decline are varied and discussed by Deakin, 'The Vitality of a Tradition . . .', 170.

<sup>28</sup> In an interview with the author 19 February 1974.

<sup>29</sup> See Brewer, 'The BUF in Birmingham . . .', 42–3.

<sup>30</sup> In an interview with the author 8 November 1973.

<sup>31</sup> In a letter to the author dated 31 October 1973.

<sup>32</sup> In an interview with the author 3 December 1973.

<sup>33</sup> In an interview with the author 3 December 1973.

<sup>34</sup> Particularly emphasized by Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism . . .', 78 ff; and 'Great Britain', in S. Woolf, *European Fascism* (London, 1980), 271.

<sup>35</sup> Board of Deputies, Administration Committee Report 1936, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>36</sup> Harry Levine, 'The History of the Birmingham Jewish Community', *Birmingham Jewish Recorder*, November 1938.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1939.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, August 1939.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, January 1939.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, December 1938.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, November 1938.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, November 1938.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1939.

<sup>44</sup> Board of Deputies, Secretary's Report 1936, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London.

<sup>45</sup> Neville Laski, 'The Jew in the World Today', Board of Deputies of British Jews pamphlet, 1937.

<sup>46</sup> This is stated in Broetz, 'Outlines of Jewish Society in London . . .', 30.

<sup>47</sup> Brewer, 'The BUF in Birmingham . . .', 39 ff.

<sup>48</sup> Some of these interviews are reported in J. Brewer, 'The BUF', in S. Larsen, B. Hagtvet and J. Myklebust, *Who Were the Fascists* (Bergen, 1980). Also see *Mosley's Men . . .*, chapters 1–3.

<sup>49</sup> Brewer, 'The BUF in Birmingham . . .', 41; C. Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (London, 1961), 131–9.

<sup>50</sup> Reported in Skidelsky, 'Great Britain . . .', 271.

<sup>51</sup> Benewick, *The Fascists . . .*, 217–34; J. Brewer, 'The BUF, Sir Oswald Mosley . . .', 158–65; Mandle, *Anti-Semitism . . .*, 56–65.

<sup>52</sup> As seen by his biographer, Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley . . .*, 380, 392 ff.

<sup>53</sup> For Mosley's speeches on anti-Semitism see Mandle, *Anti-Semitism . . .*, 2, 9, 11, 13, 27, 28, 30, 47.

<sup>54</sup> See Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF . . .', 128; Mandle, *Anti-Semitism . . .*, 4; Brewer, 'The BUF, Sir Oswald Mosley . . .', 122 ff.

<sup>55</sup> See Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF . . .', 120–1.

<sup>56</sup> The BUF's Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Evesham has already expressed this. On East Anglia see, Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* . . ., 326.

<sup>57</sup> See Brewer, 'The BUF in Birmingham . . .', 39.

<sup>58</sup> Skidelsky, 'Great Britain . . .'.

<sup>59</sup> Benewick, *The Fascist Movement* . . ., 13.

<sup>60</sup> Skidelsky, 'Great Britain . . .', 278.